

# Shenandoah

Vol. II

Spring, 1951

No. 1

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## TRIBUTE TO JOHN GOULD FLETCHER

EUGENE HAUN

Of Broken Effort and Desire

JOHN GOULD FLETCHER

Two Posthumous Poems

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Eugene Haun

## OF BROKEN EFFORT AND DESIRE:

A general consideration of the poetry of  
John Gould Fletcher

### I

The land he left was an incorrigible wilderness. Every forest was undergrown with its thicket, and the whole countryside was a forest. The towns were pleasant, the farms arable and rich, but the woods beset them.

The situation has been altered somewhat now. Many of the towns have become cities; more land is under cultivation; much of the timber has been cut over; but the atmosphere of wilderness persists, in spite of those changes. Of course, as a man goes through the woods there, he might see the most pleasing sights: a spring flowing out of a rock and dogwood blooming over it, violets growing among fallen pine-needles, a cardinal settling Pentecostal on a bough. But such occasional gentleness does little to diminish the feeling set up by the implacable fecundity of that soil. Briar, weed, and sapling contend for the same ground. The trees, seemingly triumphant above them, are themselves prey to moss, to lichen, to blight, to insidious tendrils of ivy. Plant and animal rot where they drop, and the woods are indifferent to their fall. In such a wilderness, a man is hard put to get along. His body is subject to the frankness of the seasons, and his will must wrest an orderly yield from the chaotic fruitfulness of that ground. This is the world as God left it, and not too much can be done to soften it. Of those men who came early to that country, only the strong ones lingered, and they grew almost to despise a landscape that was neat and tidy. The more civilized person, however, is likely to feel in some way threatened by the sight of such inordinate growth.

For there is in the whole landscape—in the mountains aloof to the Northwest and in the melancholy swell of the great plain to the Southeast—a feeling of something withdrawn, as though the earth were suffering some proud and private grief which is none of mankind's concern. It is a feeling of tragedy; for this land has survived natural sorrows old, remote, forgot: the hurricane up from the Gulf, the tornado writhing out of the West, the awe-striking onrush of the Mississippi in full flood, the fire set by lightning, roaring unquenched up to the escarpment where the granite backbone breaks in compound fracture through the ridge.

Men who are bred there, when they go away, leave few traces on the land, but the land makes its mark on them. Even now, among those who are really native to the place, only a few are very far removed from the soil; fifty years ago, no one was. Wherever they went, so long as they lived, the sky was portentous and the earth was real. That sense of natural tragedy went with them, and they kept in their characters something of the granite remoteness of the Northern mountains, the impenetrability of the thickets, the stillness of the bayous, the loneliness of the plain that sweeps away towards the Mississippi, that mile-wide waste of water merging subtly with the Gulf.

It is no uncommon thing for men who leave there to return home in their late years.

## II

I am trying to scrape together enough poems to make another volume—about the fourteenth I have published in my lifetime! I suppose I have written more poetry than all the Fugitives put together (but I can't say that my work is better—because so far as sales or reputation goes, I haven't any). I want to keep on, though.

So wrote John Gould Fletcher, in a letter dated April 29, 1930, from London, to Donald Davidson. His supposition was very nearly correct, for by the time of his death twenty years later, he had published some eighteen volumes of poetry, to say nothing of those poems which appeared in magazines and were never collected, or of those which were never published at all. Nor does this reckoning take into account the large body of his critical writings, social

as well as artistic. In addition, his letters would have to be enumerated literally by thousands.

To have brought forth so much, a man must have labored day in and day out. One must admire the effort, but the effort of so much production is plethoric. Confronted with eighteen volumes of the careful poetry of John Crowe Ransom (a condition which might come to pass if Mr. Ransom should live two hundred years longer), one might feel the same consternation; but, even in reading single poems of Fletcher, one is likely to feel that they are too long, that they could have done with revision and pruning. Good lines are undergrown with cliché; a trope which has a promising growth to begin with will become entangled in its own rhetoric; dull stanzas close with an image like a Turner sunset, an image which shows them up without illuminating them. His publication is an uncritical wilderness.

This failure adequately to judge his own work was a prime fault, but to discuss the causes of it is rather the business of the biographer than of the critic. One may not assume, however, that Fletcher was arrogantly assured of greatness, nor that he was immodest in any way. He simply was not able to estimate the comparative values of his several efforts until after a long time had elapsed; meanwhile, he would have published the work if he could. It is a natural failing among artists in any medium, but it seems to have prevailed over Fletcher's discretion to an unhappy degree. He wrote under the stress of honest emotion, but his craftsmanship was not always adequate to the demands of his vision.

Art may be, finally considered, a process, not a thing in itself. (These are merely pragmatic theses, introduced for purposes of discussion here, and by no means intended to stand as conclusive.) Art is not static; it is kinetic, or empathic. A definition of art may include the ideas of the communication and the recreation of an individual (though not necessarily esoteric) synthesis of human experience, a process to be carried on by integrating a group of symbols within a given artistic medium.

The activity involved in choosing and integrating these symbols is craft. The aesthetic success of the artist will be largely dependent upon his success as a craftsman, but craft is essentially a means and not an end. To be valid, a symbol must be a last des-

perate means of communication, a final effort to explicate a thought or a feeling or a complex of both, too subtle for forthright exposition; yet it should appear to evolve spontaneously from its substance. The symbol must stand for some aspect of the significance inherent in human experience. It is not enough for the art object merely to be beautiful. The repetition of any sensual experience, however beautiful, will become monotonous and irritating, as the treble sing-song of a child might, if it does not signify.

The task of the artist lies then not alone nor even primarily in an attempt to perfect his craft. Perfect his craft he must, to whatever extent he may, but his fundamental effort lies in effecting his own synthesis of human experience. The artist is great in proportion to the validity of his synthesis; he is effective as an artist, after that, in proportion to the excellence of his craft. The task of the artist, as craftsman, then becomes that of finding out and integrating the symbols which will most efficiently convey his synthesis. The artist achieves his style, first by gaining an insight into human experience, then by telling, within the privilege of his medium, the truth about what he sees, as exactly and as simply as possible, unequivocally subordinating virtuosity to honesty.

The synthesis effected by Fletcher was not unworthy of a great poet. Let it be said—respectfully, and to his credit both as a man and as a poet—that Fletcher was not a minor poet who succeeded; he was a major poet who was not able successfully to carry out a major poetic effort. His view of life was consistent and profound, and the line of its development may clearly be followed from the juvenilia through his latest work. In the climactic poem of the volume which marked the climax of his career, *The Black Rock*, he wrote:

Have mercy upon us, O God, because the end is darkness,  
Because faithless, hopeless, loveless, we yet cry out to You,  
Who have deafened Your ears for eternity and will never  
make us an answer;  
Because we have nothing left but to cry out and to pass on  
in the darkness,

\* \* \*

But for one little instant, because we cry out without cause,  
Without reason, without excuse, merely because we dare cry  
out,  
Have mercy now upon us!

Here is a key statement in the synthesis of John Gould Fletcher. Its tonic is romantic, its dominant rebellious, and its general tone tragic.

This is romanticism in the great tradition of Byron and Melville: The feeling that life is essentially tragic, that man is foredoomed, that "the end is darkness," that—though God may not be importuned—a man is yet a man: It is his glory to be able to recognize his doom, and it is his ineluctable right to protest it, to call the Creator to account, even to struggle against Him, as an angry child might struggle in the arms of his dispassionate father, knowing that his father will conquer and will furthermore restrain him from undue violence.

With your (*sic*) outlaws, O God, let me stand up at the judgment;

With those that blasphemed You, because they sought You always;

With those who denied You because You denied Yourself to them;

With those who were broken on the great terrible wheel of this earth.

This disposition towards rebellion always qualified Fletcher's pessimism, and pessimistic he was throughout his career as a poet. But it was not the pagan pessimism of Housman, nor the agnostic pessimism of Hardy, nor the pessimism of the renegade Catholic, Baudelaire. "I have never felt *comfortable* in pessimism, as has Jeffers, for instance," Fletcher once remarked, for his was that peculiarly Protestant pessimism which causes more torment than all other kinds put together. A pagan or an agnostic pessimist may face life with an attitude of dignity, or an attitude which may be consciously ironical, or even humorous, for he is at the disposal of forces which are, as he believes, entirely impersonal. Mercy he does not ask, because he thinks there is nothing which might grant it. For the Protestant pessimist, however, the conflict is intensely personal, involving, as it does, not a loss of faith in the existence of an anthropomorphic god, but a loss of faith in the possibility of mediation between that Divine Personality—which is omniscient, omnipresent,—and his own. His assumption is that God could have precluded evil; He did not; evil thrives; and God ignores its con-

sequences to live in a state of misery which He could alleviate: The misery must be borne; there is no changing that; but it need not be borne without protest.

This note of protest sounds the pedal point in Christian tragedy, but the protest does no good; it is simply to be made for the record, "because we dare cry out." As Fletcher visualized it, Christ Himself protested this unnecessary suffering:

There was darkness over the earth till the ninth hour,  
And then those watching heard a far-off cry:  
'Eli! Eli!' it said, and it had power  
That seemed to split the solitude of sky.

Even the cry of Christ brought no relief:

It brought the darkness nearer.

The truth was, according to Fletcher, that man's condition is hopeless, and he was not going to degrade himself by attempting to compromise truth.

Humbling themselves and their immortal pride,  
Men chose the barren stone where Peter's courage died.

This pessimism and the rebellion consequent upon it characterize the whole range of his utterance, from the time when he closed *The White Symphony*:

Dark graves never changing,  
White dream drifting, never changing above them:  
O that the white scroll of heaven might be rolled up,  
And the naked red lightning thrust at the smouldering earth!

and when he referred to the house where he was born:

All over the house there is a sense of futility;  
Of minutes dragging slowly  
And repeating  
Some worn-out story of broken effort and desire.

It pervaded the writings of his middle years, showing up constantly in such poems as those previously quoted, from *The Black Rock*. In his last volume, *Burning Mountain* (1946)—which he had originally intended to call *Walking Shadow*—he was still to write:

**We hear nothing**

But a cry that mankind is betrayed; that the children must  
scatter in panic;  
The famine is moving on fast behind the fury  
Whereby the legions were battered. We have nothing;  
Nothing but a shattered hope and a stubborn  
Will to resist, and to add horror to horror.

It is not an attitude which leads to resignation. It is too personal to allow detachment, without which, of course, humor is impossible. In all the poetry of Fletcher, it is very difficult to find any humor. As a poet, he took himself with great seriousness.

**III**

Pressed by the conflicts inherent in this attitude, however, poets have written greatly, and they might conceivably yet, for this inner struggle affords no minor theme, and men still contend so within themselves. Indeed, the problem of theodicy has been central in Renaissance thought, and the failure to resolve it may be one reason why our society is by now Christian in hardly any more than name. To expound the reasons for Fletcher's failure to deal with this theme is, again, the task of his biographer. To Fletcher, during his Imagist period, might be applied the criticism applied to Monet by Cézanne: He was "only an eye. But good God, what an eye!" Later, when he began to attempt to generalize upon what he saw, his craftsmanship failed him. Until the last phase of his career, he was hard put to master the essentials of conventional verse. He did not frequently—until that time—achieve a style unequivocally his own, nor was he often able to sustain the production of verse of consistently good quality throughout a work of any length, with the possible exceptions of *Irradiations* and the *Symphonies*, if they are to be considered unified works. Even such a consideration would be open to ready challenge, for it was in the achievement of form that Fletcher suffered his most serious lapse as a craftsman.

Other lapses there were, but they might almost be passed over as personal foibles: The inversions, the archaisms, the naive use of cliché. But the failure to achieve form one may not overlook. Not to be protested here is the lack of pattern in the verse itself; but there is not in these poems that precise integration of verse-

movement, image, and idea which characterizes great poetry. Without it, aesthetic communication is ineffectual. With his usual vigor, Fletcher himself, in the Preface to *Preludes and Symphonies*, defended his poetry against the charge of metrical formlessness. Some time later (1945), he wrote, in affirmation of a comment by a critic:

In stating that the idea of the Symphonic structure came to me by accident, in "Blue Symphony" you are quite correct. But later on, I developed it deliberately into a structure of four contrasting movements. Thus for instance, the poem "Lincoln" written April 19, 1916 has this sort of structure. So too has "Manhattan" in *Breakers and Granite*. Other poems in this book, all written before 1920, are like a suite, rather than a symphony; for instance, the "Down the Mississippi," the "Arizona Poems"—which deal loosely with the whole Southwest, rather than Arizona. These poems are less subjective, less allusive, than the Symphonies. But the musical research (balancing of theme with opposing theme) went on, in my case—and can be found in the XXIV Elegies, if not in "South Star." J. G. F.

But this statement, too, bears the same marks of *ex post facto* rationalization noted by Amy Lowell and Edward Garnett when they examined Fletcher's prefatory claim that he had written the *Symphonies* according to a preconceived program. Are there really any formal resemblances to be noted among the poems mentioned here, as, for instance, between "Lincoln" and "Manhattan"? If there are, they are only of the most tenuous nature. The "themes" have not really the musical exactitude which he holds to be inherent in them. And how do they oppose each other? or in what manner do they contrast? Can one achieve anything like sonata-form poetry? There comes the uneasy feeling that, in such pronouncements as the one foregoing, Mr. Fletcher was really elaborating figures of speech. Only by making the most careless generalization could one say that he never achieved form in his poetry, but it is not often to be found, even in his better efforts.

#### IV

If he did not often achieve form, he frequently achieved mood and manner, throughout his career, but most notably during the

period of his association with the Imagists, which began when he became acquainted with Amy Lowell, and which had ended by the time of the publication of *Breakers and Granite* in 1921. It need not be assumed that his achievements at that time were the results of his association with them. By the restrictions of their craft, the Imagists were cut off from any expression of idea as such and were left dependent upon image, usually pictorial. With pictures, they said whatever they could, but that, of course, was not much. One picture is not really worth ten thousand words; it usually takes about ten thousand words adequately to explicate one picture. Fortunately for Fletcher, he was then interested in working within the strict limits of Imagism; by means of images he would evoke general sensations and emotions.

Some years after their composition, he wrote of *Irradiations* and the *Symphonies*:

The value, then, of this book resides rather in its display of lyric temperament than in any ideas it may contain. It does not belong to that main branch of poetry, the branch that is pure folk-song . . . Neither can it be classed with the kind of poetry that presupposes a steadily-held philosophic background . . . But perhaps there is still a third category of poetry, the kind of poetry that has nothing to justify it except its own eagerness for beauty . . . To that kind this book belongs.

He may have misjudged his own intentions somewhat. Certainly the poems belong in the category to which he assigns them; but mere eagerness for beauty would not justify poetry. On the contrary, these poems do presuppose a philosophic background, held with firm steadiness, that one already discussed in this consideration. The beautiful imagery in the *Symphonies* dilutes that bitter pessimism; however, the imagery exists, not apart from the pessimism, but because of it. It may not be the hopeless gloom which pervades much of his later work, but it is of the same stuff, and it does provide a constant philosophic background.

These poems, informed as they are by deeply felt emotion arising from profound pessimism, give to Fletcher his purchase on immortality. They may well stand as the largest single achievement of the Imagist Movement, as its most representative if not

its most characteristic production; for, of those who really qualify as Imagists (Mr. Ezra Pound and D. H. Lawrence did not.), Fletcher is the only one with the approach of a major poet. The Imagist Movement never became any more than what Miss Lowell would have called a "tendency," perhaps not because of any differences among the poets concerning details of craftsmanship, but because of a failure to make a common approach to the problem of life, a failure to effect any synthesis of experience which might have had its greatest components in common. But Fletcher had already made his own synthesis: It is almost completely recorded in the five volumes of the juvenilia, published simultaneously in May, 1913, before he had become acquainted with any of the Imagists; so that, although the discipline of the Imagist manner precluded direct expression of idea, his ideas come through in such force that they make the work of certain more thorough-going Imagists seem puny and ineffectual by comparison.

The major technical device at his command during this time was a development on metaphor which he had worked out, following the examples of certain French poets, principally that of Verhaeren. Amy Lowell referred to it as the "unrelated method," and Garnett called it the "allusive method," an appellation which Fletcher came to accept. The allusive method was employed in verses which were, to use Fletcher's term, orchestrated. Orchestration was at once an extension and an amalgamation of conventional metrics and phonetic ornaments to a condition the full richness of which may be appreciated by reading his most successful attempt at what he called "polyphonic prose," *Clipper Ships*. One of the most subtle efforts to combine these two techniques—the allusive method and orchestration—is "The White Symphony." Of its themes, he wrote, in his autobiography, *Life Is My Song*:

I had intended the 'White Symphony' to symbolize only my restless and ever-dissatisfied search for perfection; but it seemed to me, in the end, rather to restate still more clearly the themes of loneliness and frustration.

It is very difficult, as a matter of fact, to ascertain just what were the themes of this poem. There is no direct statement, and

there are no clues beyond a few scattered guide-words, usually adjectives. The images used in this poem he acquired through contemplation of a bowl of peonies, the view of London from the Crystal Palace, and some Hiroshige snow-scenes. Once the sources of the imagery are known, the images can be related to them with difficulty, but what they symbolize beyond that remains an intriguing mystery. The trope is transacted, not within the poem, but between the poem and the poet; if the reader is to know what the poem intends, he must align his mood with that of the poet. What the allusive method finally becomes is a process of communication and recreation, by means of decorative symbols, of the mood set up in the poet's mind by an emotion or an idea, the symbols being drawn from reality but re-ordered by the poet.

The allusive method might just as well have been called the illusive or the elusive method, for it is all somewhat indefinite. This indefinite quality is at once the fault and the fascination of the *Symphonies*. When despair is presented in terms of a stoker on board ship, the danger and the delight of the allusive method—indeed, of symbolism in general—are apparent. The danger, of course, is that of incomplete communication or actual misunderstanding; the delight is that of personal participation, on the part of the reader, in creation.

## V

Because of his intense desire to express directly what he felt,—a desire so strongly satisfied in his talk and in his letters,—such guarded communication as might result from a symbolical approach did not content him for long. On June 28, 1916, he wrote to Amy Lowell:

As regards my own work, I recognize in myself a change in the direction of greater breadth, simplicity of means, and also a stronger impersonal note—I am going out for 'high seriousness' as you say, and I feel more sure that I am on the right track than I did six months ago, when I was in the transition stage. It seems to me that I was, in *Goblins and Pagodas*, too preoccupied with style, that is to say, with the way in which to say things, rather than in the thing said. Now I am all the other way about.

The reversal was not perhaps quite so complete as he had intended.

Try as he might to "wither into the truth," he could not make the act of withering proceed in a uniform fashion; the result was a long period of stylistic confusion. He was left with a dilemma which may have been in part responsible both for his failure to achieve significant form and for his failure therefrom to deal greatly with the subject-matter inherent in his synthesis: How could he resolve his habit of producing a poetry of symbolism with his urge towards a poetry of statement? Confusion resulting from that dilemma is apparent through *Branches of Adam*, *The Black Rock*, and many of the XXIV *Elegies*. It was not until after the publication of *The Black Rock* in 1928, when his thoughts began to turn homewards, that he achieved a style which to some degree resolved his problem. This was the style which he used throughout *South Star* and *The Burning Mountain*. Its simple success is evident in such a poem as his "Requiem for a Twentieth-century Outlaw: *In memoriam Charles, 'Pretty Boy', Floyd.*"

Who knows what dreams assailed the alley cat  
 Whose forbears had been lions? Does the hand  
 Of time too hurriedly altered, alter that  
 Which chimes like music through a bygone land?  
 Yet so it was that none might heed his dream;  
 Eating the gall of lead for all his pride,  
 Harried from town to town, past field and stream,  
 He turned and fled and turned and fled—then died.  
 The dark earth took him back to her wide breast,  
 Unreckoning of all things but the star-sown sky.  
 Having already rocked to perfect rest  
 Wilder and bolder sons, in years gone by.

Those two latter volumes attest his love for his native region. In them he speaks finally with his own voice, because it is the voice of his own. The speech is not polished, but it is moving, and it is never false. He made an authentic summation of his own place as it stood when he knew it. Regionalism has now to a degree gone out of fashion; but it is a worthy thing to have committed to literary memory, in a way oftentimes not merely fine but final, a place which is changing and a generation who are gone.

For to recount the career of John Gould Fletcher would be to tell of a great return. He went off to a foreign country as a young

man, leaving behind not only his people and his place, but also his culture, his religion and politics, all that would have been his by custom if he had stayed at home, taking with him only the ethics of his group. After a time of this exile, moral and physical, he began to assay what he had given up, and it seemed to him too much. He tried hard to make his peace with estrangement: by immersing himself in the culture of the place in which he was living, by attempting to align his thought with culture patterns older and more general than any ones which were contemporaneous; and finally by attempting to resolve his isolation in mysticism. Unable to complete himself as a personality by any or all of the three efforts, he began almost desperately to try to get home. After long struggle, at the end of twenty-five years, he returned to Arkansas and lived there until he died.

#### It is a land

Of waste where nature sprawls, setting at naught  
The ruined plans of man. A land unknown,  
Blazing in summer with the sumach blooms,  
And glossy leaves of oaks, as raindrops slide  
Into the shy stream, and beneath the boughs  
Only the darkness stirs; where year on year  
The hawk hangs to the withered branch to tell  
Whatever it is that moves amid cloud-shadowed hollows.

EUGENE HAUN

#### *A Chronological Bibliography of the Poetical Volumes of John Gould Fletcher*

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1938. *Selected Poems*. New York, Toronto: Farrar & Rinehart.
1941. *South Star*. New York: Macmillan.
1946. *The Burning Mountain*. New York: E. P. Dutton.

## RESTAURANTS AND EATING PLACES

### I. Working-class Cafeteria (Nalords)

The young man without a necktie,  
In an unpressed suit worth fifteen dollars,  
    his left hand swiftly jogging  
Beats out the blaring rhythm  
Of Red River days  
The while with his eyes and hand he studies  
    closely the paper

The thin pale, little woman  
Holding herself stiff and rigid  
Chokes on her cup of coffee,  
And outside others go scurrying  
Looking pale in the wan light of the morning.

As their feet flick the pavement  
They race on to the counter,  
Where sits a small grey man with rat-like jaws,  
Weary eyes behind glasses,  
Peers at the world he is tired of, but does not  
    want to leave.

The waitress behind the glassed-in showcase,  
    with its ramp of nickel  
Sets down the new-filled cups with precise,  
    impersonal movements  
Of a mechanical toy—all we awakened  
Live like weak, weary fish at the bottom  
    of this ocean  
We have no strength to leave the pool, nor  
    power to rise higher here.

### II. Middle-Class (Childs')

Across from my table,  
The serious faced young man, thick glasses to  
    his eyes

Sits with his young bride;  
 They have not been married, I think, many months.  
 Pale girl, a little mousey, but sweet and fresh  
     and clean  
 He is so solemn-faced she must work to make him  
     smile.

Across from them, across a very long way,  
 The middle-aged, dark-skinned couple sit and eat  
 Their courses stolidly, not raising eyes  
     From any plate

And farther along, much nearer to the door  
 A woman with earrings and a new hat bandies  
     remarks and laughs  
 Turning redder as she speaks,  
 With a fortyish-looking man.  
 Did they go off together? Did I know?

Without the street  
 Spotted with recent drizzle, cleared of crowds  
 Bares now the memories of another changeful day.  
 I sit alone and meditate on the more than forty  
     years  
 That have run past, like maddened racers, since I  
     first came this way.

### III. Upper-Class Lunch

In the blue room, discreet,  
 Quiet, efficient, far from the world's clatter,  
 The dowagers meet  
     And fill the air with chatter;  
 Having at least ten thousand a year makes all  
     the difference  
 To mood and tense,

In the blue room.  
 I look at the glossy-haired publisher who has brought  
     me in  
 And strive to make myself heard above the din

Useless, since dollars give the right to air opinions  
here  
That much is very clear;  
In the blue room.  
We here assume  
Death is impersonal accident, living is being rich  
And doing as one likes—let the beggar crawl to his ditch  
What more than this need we seek—what more  
than this need we say?  
The blue room is not important, unless you  
would have it that way.

JOHN GOULD FLETCHER



## BY THE POTOMAC

By the Potomac's broad and mighty shore  
By the elusive sweep of sea-horizon,  
The cradle of our land, we went to find  
The worn fields once again awakening to the sun  
The glistening ploughs came forth to draw their  
furrows  
East to west, over earth that held to sky  
The dogwood flaunting its stars against the pines  
The sleepy peace, the sea-gull wavering by.

You whom three thousand hours had marked as mine  
To seek, to long for, never to possess—  
By the Potomac's misty shore  
Stood, in the loveliness of your dove grey dress  
And all around you, my thoughts veered and played  
As play the drifting clouds and bird songs over the land  
Veiled by the rain, opening its veins to sun  
Nothing in life could hurt me, since I still held your  
hand.

JOHN GOULD FLETCHER

Thomas H. Carter

## FAMILY REUNION

When he was young, William Track sometimes thought of death as a frightening specter. As he grew older, he had lost that conception without gathering any to replace it; but now he had one.

Death was a little old lady in an ornate coffin. Death was wispy white hair and sunken eyelides and pale transparent skin. It was a thin, sad mouth and a dim, lost face and nobody he had ever known.

"It's lovely," he said softly. "The undertaker did a fine job." He moved away from the coffin and did not look back at it. She had been his grandmother.

His cousin Marie moved with him. At the door, she took his arm.

"Stay here with me for a while, Billy. They wanted somebody to sit with the body, but somehow I don't feel right."

He said, "Sure," and they sat on the couch, talking softly. Marie was around five years older than he was. She had been married two years, but he liked her well enough—as well as he liked any of these strange country relatives.

The room was dim and formally furnished in the style of twenty years ago. The sitting room was something special, to be saved for special occasions—like this.

William Track shivered. The family could live in the bare, uncomfortable remainder of the farmhouse; but the sitting room had to be just so. It didn't make sense to him, but he had learned to accept many things which seemed to him strange about his father's family. Perhaps it was that he and they lived on different planes. His mother, who was reared on a farm, said they were simply country people, as though that were sufficient explanation.

Marie asked him something about his high school studies and he told her. It was sticky hot in the room and flies buzzed sluggish-

ly. He resisted an impulse to brush away those that crawled over the glass on the face of the coffin.

With relief, he saw Marie's husband Alan peer in the door.

"You two can come out now," he said. "I'll get somebody to spell you." Quickly, they stood up and left the room.

The sunlight outside brought sudden sweat to his skin, and he shaded his eyes. "What do we do now?" he asked Marie. His eyes roved vaguely over the vast lawn.

She mopped her plain face with a handkerchief. "Just wait, I guess. Let's go over to the car." Obediently, he followed her.

At least they were able to shut the flies out by closing the car windows. And, he thought wryly, trapping those already within. Still it was better than outside. They sat in muggy silence.

Watching the people come and go in the yard, he thought again that it was a huge family. Now the place literally swarmed with relatives, those closest sad and sometimes crying with grief, those more distant unhappy and dutifully regretful. Most of them he did not know.

The truth of the matter was that he had not visited his grandparents very often. He never knew quite what to say, or what they would approve of, and the presence of his innumerable aunts, cousins, and almost-kin people made him uncomfortable.

The family was spread out all over the state now. The brothers and sisters of his father lived nearer the home place, with their children and their children's children dwelling fanwise out from them. It was incredible somehow that this barren old farm house had remained the center of their lives.

Alan stepped from the house and came to the car. Sliding under the wheel, he said, "We might as well go on to the church."

"I guess so," Marie said listlessly.

The door opened and his grandfather walked out and stood there staring blindly into the sun. He had on a clean grey suit; his shirt was stiff and white, and his tie was twenty years old. The old man stood very stiff and straight. Age had not bent him, but it had made him shrunken and frail. His skin had felt the whip of wind, rain and sun too long; but there was something almost angelic in the pure white hair and long droopy mustache. The clear blue eyes looked damp.

William Track felt a pang inside him as the car pulled into the street. The old man *was* his grandfather; he should have come to see him more often.

Certainly, old Track was not the best man that ever lived. He had been harsh and sometimes cruel to his family; he ruled them as a tyrant, even now, and they were, some of them, old men; he was not an easy man to know, and he had never known how to express love. But he had worked every day of his life, though he could not do as much now, and had kept the laws, and had tried to raise his children to be good and honest men and women. He was strange and always independent of others. He was William Track's grandfather and now he was completely alone.

Over the dusty country roads, Alan drove the little car. The church was square and white and no grass grew around it. The graveyard lay to one side.

To his surprise William Track saw that the car belonging to his cousin Thelma was already parked in the shade of a bunch of trees. Smiling with satisfaction, he emerged into the church yard. Of all these relations he liked Thelma best, simply because she was ambitious and had abandoned the country for a job as stenographer in a nearby city.

He spoke to Alan and Marie: "I'd better go speak to Thelma."

Frowning, Marie said nothing. Her branch of the family and Thelma's engaged in a sort of constant feud. Luckily, both sides seemed to respect his position of neutrality.

As it happened, he stayed with Thelma during the funeral service. It was quite an affair . . .

The church was built like an oblong box, with a great curved ceiling. Choir lofts were placed near the front on each side, facing the minister's raised stand. Behind each loft was a colored glass window. In one of these lofts sat members of the family; in the other were eight scrawny women who apparently composed the choir. The rest of the church was packed close with assorted humanity, all hot and all in one way or another miserable.

Later, William Track thought there was nothing in the world with which he might compare the whole business; the word "circus" came easily to mind, but that was not it.

The minister, a long lean, predominantly brown man, ad-

vanced to the center of the platform. Fixing his audience with piercing red eyes, he began to speak in a low monotonous voice. The words were not quite plain, but the tone was curiously compelling. When he paused, the end lady of the choir cried "Amen!" He hesitated and she cried "Amen!" once more.

Then the minister unloosed a vast torrent of words, now fast, now slow, never clear, all delivered in a sort of impassioned chant. Each time he paused someone cried "Amen!"

William Track had never seen anything quite like this before, and it seemed to him disrespectful in the presence of the dead woman; but the rapt faces of the audience saw no incongruity. Now the man was moving up and down the platform, his long legs shuffling. His voice rose emotionally and then died down to a whisper, all in the same sentence.

Finally he spoke forcefully: "Now, friends, let us pray!"

With eyes closed and face cast toward the ceiling, he was into his finale. The harsh voice continued to rise, break and slide madly. Of the words, William Track could distinguish only "mother, sister, devoted companion—."

Head bent, William Track looked at his grandfather. The old man was staring straight ahead; he was too deaf to follow the content; but from each eye had come a cold, painful tear that rolled down his rough, stone cheeks. Under the sagging white mustache, his mouth quivered faintly.

After that William Track did not feel like laughing. The sight of his grandfather touched something in him; all at once the old man became pathetic; there was tragedy in the erect way he stood. I must come see him more, thought William Track. Biting his lip he inhaled deeply.

Eventually, the minister finished praying. Looking down at the audience, his eyes lit on old Track. "Brother Track, brother Track, sir, I hope you won't mind if I don't go to the grave. I promised to preach another funeral. I hope you don't mind, sir."

The old man did not understand, and they had to explain to him. Fiercely, William Track stared at the preacher; he could not quite believe what he had heard. You ignorant bastard, he thought furiously. Is this any way for a funeral? Can't you give an old man that much satisfaction?

When he did comprehend, the old man stared coldly at the minister. "Go where you please," he said. He took out a handkerchief and awkwardly wiped his cheeks.

That was all there was to it. The people left the church and everything was finished. At the door Thelma and William Track and Marie and her husband were all pressed together. Outside they paused as a group, apparently willing during this event to forget that they despised each other.

William Track breathed deeply of the clean air. "I'm glad that's over," he said.

"How can you say that?" Marie asked his reproachfully. "It was just what Grandma wanted."

"Was it?" he said. "I hope she liked it."

They all gave him a look equally compounded of shock and hurt. Suddenly, he remembered the lonely old man who was his grandfather; in his mind, he saw again the tears rolling slowly down each worn cheek. "I'm sorry, I'm very sorry," said William Track contritely. "It was a—a lovely funeral."

## BOOK REVIEWS

THE LETTERS OF EZRA POUND: 1907-1941. Edited by D. D. Paige, Preface by Mark Van Doren. Harcourt, Brace. \$5.00.

### I

This sturdy collection is not by any means the totality of Ezra Pound's correspondence, which must run to several thousand letters. Mr. Paige remarks in his introduction that this selection of 384 letters was made with the aim "to illuminate Pound's own work and to convey the history of the chief artistic developments of the past forty years, in so much as these touched Pound." In order to concentrate on this aim, Mr. Page has made a good many extensive deletions of material which was irrelevant to the literary point, and has sometimes suppressed the names of persons described by Pound in various degrees of harshness when attention might be diverted from critical to personal issues. The result is not so much in the usual category of autobiography revealed by letters as it is an unusual poet's handbook.

Apart from these basically necessary tasks of editing, Mr. Paige had done a certain amount of tidying up of spelling and punctuation in the interests of readability. What we have, then, is a relatively concise and coherent running account of three decades of literary activity, in which there is surprisingly little personal comment. But no amount of editing could remove traces of Pound's almost unique idiom of expression. Anyone who has seen an original typescript of one of Pound's characteristic letters will realize the infinite liveliness of the graphic and phonetic devices which he can muster. Here, for example, is the opening of a letter to T. S. Eliot in 1938:

Wall Possum, my fine ole Marse Supial: Thinking but passing over several pejorative but Possumble—oh quite possumbl— interpretations of selected passages in yr. ultimate communication, wot I sez appealin to you for the firm's interest, on your return from Pasqual meddertashuns iz:

Is this obscure? It is a rather good-humored address to a close

friend, known informally as Old Possum; a marsupial is an animal (such as an opossum) which carries its young in a pouch. The deliberately distorted allusion to Eliot's Easter celebration (Paschal, meaning Easter, also is a pun on Pascal) indicates a certain low view of Anglo-Catholicism, the view which Pound supposes a level-headed and cantankerous old Midwestern farmer would have taken. This personal idiom of correspondence becomes more pronounced over the years, and is likely to appear in a letter to a scholar of the most dignified academic position. Pound rarely becomes angry in a personal way; even his sharpest criticism of men and their works is tempered by an unending humor, which frequently takes the form of an impromptu bit of verse. I cannot think of any similar collection of letters which is more enjoyable to read.

## II

Let me say at once that this book is required reading for anyone seriously interested in American poetry of the last forty years, and its development from an awkward and prettified sort of academic exercise into a varied and rich performance which is admired by discerning people in every part of the world. No man has been more responsible for this literary development than Ezra Pound. It is of course an irony that a man indicted (but not tried) for treason to his native country should have been concerned so intimately with one of its brightest intellectual achievements; so it goes.

I assume most readers of **SHENANDOAH** are familiar with the controversy over Pound during the last few years, occasioned by his receipt of the Bollingen prize in 1949, and developed in a series of articles in **THE SATURDAY REVIEW OF LITERATURE**. One of the most unusual features of this controversy has been the fact that not a single poet of distinction has publicly spoken out against Pound. He has been attacked by gossip-columnists, Saturday Reviewers, and English teachers—a rather interesting line-up of forces, reminiscent of those who rudely handled the Romantic poets in the far-away time of Wordsworth and Keats. No one has seriously defended Pound on the political charge, and even Hemingway, whose statement is the most intelligent I have seen, has asked only charity for a defeated old man.

I briefly mention this matter because it seems to bring to focus, in its very unfortunate way, a much larger situation: the increasing break-up of American literary life into its component parts. Nowadays we have New Critics, "realistic" novelists and dramatists, liberals, conservatives, lady novelists of extreme sensitivity, the young formalist poets, to name a few of the species. These literary groups can be associated with their respective periodicals from *VOGUE* and *THEATER ARTS*; and these periodicals, in turn, tend to associate the writers with the social attitudes held by their subscribers.

During the decade in which Pound played his most important public role, from 1912 to about 1922, it was possible for one man to view these disparate literary elements, judge them with respect, and bring them into intelligible relation with one another. In this series of letters Pound discusses all the American poets who first published important work during the decade: Frost, Eliot, Amy Lowell, W. C. Williams, Marianne Moore, H. D., Fletcher, and the Midwestern group (Sandburg, Masters, and Lindsay). All of these writers appear in *POETRY* (Chicago) from 1912 on, when Pound was living in London and serving as foreign correspondent to Harriet Monroe, *POETRY*'s famous editor. I should say that his remarks on these poets have in almost every case been critically sound and often prophetic.

Early in 1913 Pound was sponsoring Robert Frost, who had come to England. After Frost was successfully launched on his career, Pound seems to have lost interest in him—Pound had very little to teach the older man. By 1915 he was writing to the *Boston Transcript*:

Of course, from the beginning, in my pushing Frost's work, I have known that he would ultimately be boomed in America by fifty energetic young men who would use any club to beat me; that was well in my calculation when I prophesied his success with the American public and especially the American reviews, and I rejoice to see that it has caught on.

A more exact calculation was never made.

This is representative of one important facet of Pound's activity: his ceaseless and unselfish effort to bring to publication

those writers he deemed worthy of respect, and the list is a considerable one. He spared almost no means within his grasp to aid T. S. Eliot, when that young man was an impoverished clerk in Lloyd's Bank; he spent years talking and writing to influential persons who might further the publication of Joyce's *Portrait of an Artist*, although he did not meet Joyce until 1920. Hemingway and Eliot, among others, have testified to his superb critical judgment of their early work. The following series of notes, in a letter to Harriet Monroe in January, 1915, is a shrewd judgment of his American contemporaries:

Fletcher is sputter, bright flash, sputter. Impressionist temperament, made intense at half-seconds.

H. D. and William C. Williams both better emotional equipment than Aldington, but lacking the superficial cleverness. Ought to produce really fine things at great intervals. Eliot is intelligent, very, but I don't know him well enough to make predictions.

Masters hits rock bottom now and again. He should comb the journalese out of his poems. I wish Lindsay all possible luck but we're not really pulling the same way, though we both pull against entrenched senility.

Sandburg may come out all right, but he needs to learn a lot about *How to Write*. I believe his intention is right.

By this time Pound could recognize, for example, that Amy Lowell was more important as a sponsor of furious literary activity than as a poet in her own right. He remarked immediately the great original talent in Eliot's "Prufrock." He found Walter Lippmann exceedingly dull. He realized that Poe and Whitman, admirable in their separate ways, were not the best models for literary aspirants. All these instinctive judgments seem correct nowadays, but who else would have made them 35 years ago?

After 1922 or so Pound's continued residence abroad (in Paris and Italy after London) was responsible for a certain distance from the newer American poets. There is no mention of such writers as Stevens, Hart Crane, or the Fugitives, who were among the most important new artists of the 1920's; the exceptions were Cummings and MacLeish. Pound presently settled at Rapallo, in Italy, and became a mentor to any young poet who would con-

sult him by mail or in person. As his interest turned more and more to economics, he tried to establish contact with the public world of politicians; I judge that he was never successful in impressing himself on any powerful Senator or M.P. This part of his career is a complicated story in itself.

### III

Pound's ideal for poetry is easy to state; he has put the matter explicitly on numerous occasions:

Poetry must be *as well written as prose*. Its language must be a fine language, departing in no way from speech save by a heightened intensity (i.e. simplicity). There must be no book words, no periphrases, no inversions. It must be as simple as De Maupassant's best prose, and as hard as Stendhal's.

\* \* \* \* \*

Objectivity and again objectivity, and expression; no hind-side-beforeness, no straddled adjectives (as "addled mosses dank"), no Tennysonianness of speech; nothing—nothing that you couldn't, in some circumstance, in the stress of some emotion, actually say. (Letter to Harriet Monroe, January, 1915)

In other words, Pound would first of all aim for a bright, hard surface for poetry, in which the image, objectively rendered, would make intelligible the emotion. Much of the best writing of the last two generations (Pound, Eliot, Joyce, Yeats and Hemingway, for example) is essentially a triumph of language, stripped of its superfluities. It is rather amusing to read, in another connection, about the time Pound was living with Yeats and doctoring up the latter's poems simply by removing adjectives here and there; as soon as Pound had gone, Yeats would slyly restore a word or two, and hastily get the poems in the mail.

The man who, on Pound's own testimony, was most responsible for the "prose tradition in poetry" was that fine novelist Ford Madox Ford. Since about the turn of the century Ford had been admonishing everyone to study Flaubert in order to achieve the fully *rendered* kind of fiction which the French had been writing for 50 years. (Ford himself worked a decade with Conrad towards that end.) Pound caught up the idea; hence "Poetry must be as

well written as prose." In 1916 he wrote to one of his pupils, Iris Barry:

As I said Sunday, I suppose Flaubert's *Trois Contes*, especially "Coeur Simple," contain all that anyone knows about writing. Certainly one ought to read the opening of the *Chartreuse de Parme*, and the first half or a more than half of the *Rouge et Noir*. Shifting from Stendhal to Flaubert suddenly you will see how much better Flaubert writes. AND YET there is a lot in Stendhal, a sort of solidity which Flaubert hasn't. A trust in the thing more than the word.

Pound intends no disrespect to Stendhal when he directs people to the opening of a novel; he means that only that part has value as a stylistic model; and the advice is still good after 35 years. Generally speaking, we can say that he is concerned with those literary techniques and influence which can be safely transmitted; his list of models is short: the principal ones are Confucius, Homer, Catullus, Dante, the Provençal poets, and Flaubert.

During the 1930's Pound aided in two notable translations: W. H. D. Rouse's *Homer*, and Laurence Binyon's *Dante*. A series of letters criticize the fine points of these translations, the best of their kind. It is rather curious that the latest editions of Rouse and Binyon give no credit to Pound, considering the extensive work he did, fully revealed in these letters. He put the same enthusiasm into writing that he did when he used to fence with Yeats, play tennis with Ford, or box with Hemingway.

ASHLEY BROWN

AMERICAN PAINTING. By Virgil Barker. Macmillan, 1950. 717 pp.  
\$12.50.

The ascent of the painter in America to a status of acceptance as a useful being was a tortuous climb. In the austerity of a frontier civilization, there was little wealth with which to patronize the artist. The unbalanced man-land ratio made for a situation where every man was needed as a hewer of wood rather than as a dabbler in pigments. Furthermore, the dominantly Puritan population of the New World had a disdain for the frills of life. The vanity

which motivated a commissioning of a portrait painter was one of the deadly sins as recognized by our straight-laced ancestors. Later, when Puritanism had drifted into materialism, the ground was still far from fertile for the breeding of dreamy young men who loved to feel the plasticity of the oils and marvel at their magic as they transformed one another into new blushes on the palette in a sort of alchemy. When artistic souls did emerge, their future as working painters was anything but secure.

The story of the struggle is fascinating. It has been told, but never adequately. Perhaps Virgil Barker has attempted the final word with his new volume, *American Painting*. If facts, research, and consummate writing skill add up to the complete story, then Barker has succeeded. This is a monumental reference book, a bulky slick paper job which looks expensive and is more costly than it looks. However, even the shocking price was evidently not enough to cover even one color print in a book which extolls the virtues of color. It may be that the drabness of the plates is forgotten in the vividness of Barker's verbal presentation.

Another thing glares at the reader besides the slick paper. It takes only a cursory glance at the table of contents to recognize that the book is misnamed. *American Painting* is a humble and unpretentious title, but it is actually a vast overstatement of the contents of Barker's latest effort. The sad fact is that this volume ends where most experts believe American art really begins,—with Homer, Ryder, and Eakins. Indeed, one art-major friend was heard to exclaim upon examining this work, "American Painting!! Why there was no American Painting before the Ash Can school!!" This moot question will not be argued, but it is possible that the author might have saved himself this type of criticism by entitling his work *Painting in America*. It is hard to refute the charge that most successful early artists of the new land were simply mimics of a decaying European style. Smibert, Stuart, West, and Copley (in Europe) are key examples of our early dependence upon Europe for inspiration, technique, and style in painting.

Nevertheless, there existed very early some evidences of a seed for a genuine American tradition. These were the "signpainters," the versatile artisans who would paint your portrait cheaper than they would whitewash your house. Oskar Hagen, in his *The Birth*

*of the American Tradition in Art*, calls this species the "Archaics." Going about their work of creating a painting with a confidence born of ignorance, these unfettered souls turned out portraits that were crude in anatomical perception and strong in their fearless execution. The two dimensional simplicity which the archaics unknowingly wrought has become the basis for the very popular school of American Primitives today. What Doris Lee and Grandma Moses do consciously for profit today came naturally to the American Archais.

The versatility of these signpainters is the subject of amused admiration in Mr. Barker's book. Sprinkled generously throughout with anecdotes and charming personality sketches, *American Painting* immediately puts one on an intimate acquaintance with the little known signpainters, and one begins to understand the reasons why these itinerant artisans could only pursue limning as a sidelight. This advertisement from the *Pennsylvania Gazette* in 1740 gives some idea of the variety of their skills.

Painting done in the best MANNER, by Gustave Hes-selius, from Stockholm, and John Winter from London, viz. Coats of Arms drawn on Coaches, Chaises, & C. or any other kind of Ornaments. Landskips, Signs, Shewboards, Ship and House Painting, Gilding of all Sorts, Writing in Gold and Colour, old Pictures clean'd and mended & C.

But the great American institution of specialization was not long in overtaking the arts. The Simiberts, the Wests and the Peales came, not as self taught jacks-of-all-trades, but as painters skilled in the schools of European sophistication. That they painted the rude American planted to resemble an English baron seems to both Barker only slightly. The author of *American Painting* does not let the cultural concept of art interfere with his rabid appreciation of technical skill.

However, American history and culture are far from neglected in the book. Indeed, one is tempted to place Barker among the foremost interpreters of American history. F. J. Turner, Semple, and Beard, with their geographical and economic interpretations, could possibly be joined by Virgil Barker as the exponent of the Artistic Interpretation. But upon re-examination it becomes clear that the author *has not* succeeded in giving us a new interpretation

of history. Though culture and history are mentioned on the same page with American painting efforts, there is never an adequate link to join the three disciplines. The nearest Barker can come to a linkup is his truism that materialism here brought an upper class which could afford to buy art. The art that these Upper Classes bought had nothing representative of America . . . only the superficiality of rococco and other effeminate European schools. No real cultural concept of art is possible as long as the work of the European school in America is extolled as Barker does it. The author seems perfectly happy that the upper classes did buy some kind of art, Europeanized and stultified though it was. The traditional picture of the starving artist in his garrett did not please Barker, and one gets the impression that he would far rather see the painter eating well and conventional than emaciated and original.

The prevalence of portraiture as the only useful application of painting is another interesting phenomenon of the American scene. Landscaping fought for existence among the artists themselves as hard as the painters fought for recognition in American society. Barker worries about whether painting is bought for vanity's sake or for real esthetic experience. He, as an artist, likes to think that his trade gave more than expanded ego to the owner of a newly painted portrait. Nevertheless Barker admits that, "... for most Americans who liked paintings, esthetic experience was still confined to the streets and taverns." The conclusion is that the portrait was nothing more than the portrait photographer of today . . . that is, he served the same purpose, the satisfaction of human vanity. It is hard to believe that the real esthetic function of art emerged until the poetry in paint by Ryder or the dreamy reality of Inness.

The reason for the nearly universal popularity of portraiture stems from the taste of the top economic level. Barker states,

Taste in painting is especially liable to conform to the often mysterious orthodoxy promulgated by those who buy pictures in order to show themselves possessed of taste.

The taste of the upper classes was not yet ready to go beyond the portrait to any active degree. Those in this nation who were buying any kind of picture from the studios were agreed that the

painter's business was still to record the human countenance. The American poet-politician Freneau, masquerading as an American philosopher-writer, stated this attitude of the American mania for portraits;

Can the great white men do nothing for their country  
but the little people be compelled to become minutely ac-  
quainted with the width of their faces; the length of their  
noses, the rotundity of their cheeks, the depression of their  
chins, or the elevation of their foreheads? O Vanity, I find  
thee existing here in every shape, and under every guise.

Once the settler in America had lost his Puritanism, which he brought from Europe, and had become assimilated in the new American materialism, which provided plenty of room for the exercise of vanity, he returned to the European art styles. So the first result of the new American environment which poured its wealth on the lucky opportunist was not the creation of a new art culture to go with the new material culture, but a return to the art of the motherland.

But the portrait was not to reign forever. The all important esthetic experience, according to Barker, emerged around the 1780's with a poet called Washington Allston. His word poems were inconsequential, but what he did with the pigments paved the way for the later mystical quality of Inness and Ryder.

Mr. Barker is not dogmatic. Esthetic experience does not come necessarily from the moonlit and mist type of painting. The technical perfection of Copley was also in its own right an entirely esthetic experience in the author's eyes. Ryder's passion was expressed in the content of the painting, while Copley poured his out in the execution of near perfect pictorialism.

The coverage of the great triumvirate, which in most minds began the "Real" American tradition, is adequate in *American Painting*. Homer, Ryder and Eakins are given full play in the last forty pages. And yet, though there can be little criticism of their presentation in Barker's suave fashion, it hardly seems fitting that only forty pages in a volume of 668 pages should be allotted to these, the most important of all. Perhaps Barker feels that there is nothing much to be said about their greatness that hasn't already been said. Nevertheless, this book, which labors along for six hun-

dred pages, comes to a close in rapid fashion. The work is reviewed, summed up, and conclusions presented in three pages, leaving the reader gasping at the sudden cessation.

Mr. Barker is not like Winslow Homer. It was Homer's belief that the subject was far more important than the artist, the works more than the man. *American Painting* is a book about artists, their personalities, their characters and the environment that surrounded them. Barker loves artists and loves to write about them. He likes to acquaint people with the artists of the past, their habits and eccentricities, and anecdotes about their lives. All this can be derived with ease from this book. But this volume does not, and cannot, make a person love art, understand it, or justify it. That cannot come from Barker's book, just as it cannot come from any book. One could never feel the esthetic experience that Barker hopes for by reading any number of big, slick, expensive reference books. Nevertheless, there is a need for attempts such as this—for pure snob appeal if nothing else—and always to satisfy the insatiable curiosity of the scholar.

And if Barker's book cannot give us the esthetic experience, it can describe it by using Ryder's own words of explanation:

"Have you ever seen an inch worm crawl up a leaf or twig, and there clinging to the very end, revolve in the air, feeling for something to reach something? That's like me. I am trying to find something out there beyond the place in which I have a footing."

JOE SCONCE

**VAUDEVILLE FOR A PRINCESS.** By Delmore Schwartz. New Directions, 1950. \$2.75.

Delmore Schwartz's latest literary effort is a volume of comic prose and serious and comic poetry that adds up to nothing but a half-hearted search for a something that is not easily defined. The search is not successful, but I do not know whether Mr. Schwartz means to let it go at that and say, as in "On a Sentence by Pascal," "truth is ridiculous" or whether he just means that he has not found truth. In the latter case, I should think he would show more concern than laughing it off with "A ho ho, and a ha ha at last." An any rate, we must not laugh his book off because it may be more significant than it seems at first glance.

Schwartz is a cynical poet—sometimes serious and sometimes humorous. There is more resignation than acceptance, and this variety of pessimism is expressed powerfully in his dramatic language:

Do we not have, in fine, depression and war  
Certain each generation? Who would want more?  
O what unsated heart would ask for more?

and:

For we must earn through dull dim suffering,  
Through ignorance and darkened hope, and hope  
Risen again, and clouded over again, and dead despair,  
And many little deaths, hardly observed,  
The early morning light we have deserved.

The poet's commentary on our times in his mocking style calls for a re-evaluation of our structure; seeing this need is his contribution.

The poet's credit is his almost-always intelligible use of the refinements of language which the Symbolists and their followers have produced. Schwartz is extremely conscious of the powers and possibilities of speech and versification and uses many diverse words and patterns to illuminate his experiences poetically. His use of unfamiliar, technical, foreign, slang, and prosaic words is similar to that of Stevens in creating irony and bringing forth rich connotation:

Nothing that he expected but surprises,  
Seeking surprise like one at Luna Park  
(All the grand ohs as genuine as a claque,  
Cigars and dolls, exploded booby prizes);

the following passage illustrates his use of the quotidianal and the commonplace, of which there is much in this volume:

Have we not television and Broadway,  
Victrolas, coca-colas, powerful cars?

Schwartz employs most of the Symbolist devices such as ambiguity, sound play, rhythm play, the paradox, the image of negation, and the use of other symbolic and metaphorical imagery; he does not indulge in the Imagist (and to a certain extent Symbolist) luxury of what Ransom calls "pure poetry"—poetry for poetry's sake, poetry that does not moralize. Schwartz's handling of content varies from mock-campaign-speech hollowness to beautiful expressions of pain in modified sonnet form:

—Some other life, dark pretty long hurt dear  
Some other world, perhaps, where all who marry  
Live with their choice, however strong their fear,  
Though like the hunch that hunchbacks carry  
All of this life, it is no happiness,  
Only the open wound of consciousness.

He excels in showing actuality and the pure motive. In his book he adds to his three previous primary topics (which George Marion O'Donnell has classified as the relationships between the Ego and the non-Ego, between the child and the man, and between the citizen and the state) and emphasizes the relationship between the lover and the loved.

The aspect about Schwartz in this volume that disturbs me most is his obviously intentional failure-pose in not finding the object of his search. This trait has not been present in his previous works to such a high degree, although it has been suggested by them. Should he follow in a logical pattern, from the change in attitude which he has already undergone I predict that his next published work will concern flight more than search. Why does the American artist (with the exception of a few like Wallace Stevens and Ben Shahn) burn himself out before he reaches maturity?

It is possible that his "failure," which he attributes to the hindrance of the past, lies in his own attempt to throw off the old European traditions without substituting for them new American traditions. Granted that the old-world past is undesirable and is a hindrance, whining about it will not help. It cannot be replaced until there is a proper replacement. That proper replacement is our real American past, our heritage, which is still to be discovered. The American writer who acts in a negative way only, throwing off the old without gaining the new, finds himself outside the old frame in which he worked and lost in a gigantic realm that is unrelated to anything that has gone before. He must convert his passionate dislike of the past into an active positive search for "some of the stories about America that have never been told," as Thomas Wolfe said, and must mold them into our heritage.

The prose selections in the book are not unique, but they are good. *Esquire* and *The New Yorker* have the same sort of thing, but theirs are good too. Everything and everyone is made fun of.

Princess Elizabeth's royal chin even takes some of the punches—the title is "SUGGESTED BY PRINCESS ELIZABETH'S ADMIRATION FOR DANNY KAYE," her "decided opinions about practically everything" are questioned in a marriage and divorce tract, and one of the poems alludes to the future Queen's desire to be a horse. These memoirs, reminiscences, and anecdotes (they are not short stories) are sophisticated parodies, written as if they are being spoken in a chatty, relaxed manner.

A variety of subjects are covered very extensively, and the reader finds it difficult to separate Schwartz's serious opinions from his humorous ones—he plays with many of the possibilities and actualities of life. He criticizes the critic, especially the critical schools of psychoanalysis and existentialism ("Existentialism means that no one else can take a bath for you."). He finds newer and dirtier interpretations of "Don Giovanni" and Shakespeare. The tale of *Hamlet* is told as a fable with a moral at the end—"there is something wrong with everyone and everything." His satirical prose is simple and anti-intellectual as well as pseudo-elegant and charming. At times he comes forth with a Godfrey-esque candor of the uncensored sort—"All men are bastards. But some bastards are nice," says one of Giovanni's feminine companions.

But the reader must not underestimate this prose by believing that its sole purpose is to be amusing. Its humor is misleading. Schwartz has a strong social sensitivity which makes him well aware of what is happening emotionally in the American environment. And he is worried about his failure in the fruitless search for truth or no truth.

I recommend this volume to a variety of people who I believe will enjoy its contents: the dilettante, who appreciates all superficiality, the intellectual poet and would-be intellectual poet, and the person who likes high-brow humor à la *New Yorker* and unashamedly dirty references à la cocktail party. The possessor of this attractive work of art, compared rightly on the inside cover to "a concert and a carnival," can find much personal pleasure in reading it himself, he can entertain all but the most unhealthy of his guests with its writings, and, if he dislikes literature entirely, he can appreciate the intrinsic beauty of the book itself, the black

and gold fantasy sandwiched between the living-room book-ends forever.

JOHN HALL, JR.



## CONTRIBUTORS

ASHLEY BROWN, a member of the Washington and Lee faculty, has been doing graduate work at Yale for the past year.

THOMAS CARTER, class of '54, has edited his own magazine, *Spearhead*, and is to be the new editor in Chief of *Shenandoah*.

JOHN GOULD FLETCHER, a member of the Fugitive group, died in 1950. The posthumous poems in this issue are from MSS. supplied by Mrs. Fletcher.

JOHN HALL, JR., is current poetry editor of *Shenandoah*, and staff advisor on Be-Bop. He plans to enter Harvard Law School in the Fall.

EUGENE HAUN, now of the University of Pennsylvania, spent several years in Mr. Fletcher's home. He did his Master's thesis, and contemplates a longer work, on Fletcher.

JOE SCONCE, Southern Conference wrestling champion, will be graduated from the Washington and Lee School of Journalism this Spring.



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